What is claimed is:

1. A system for managing an on-line virtual shopping cart which contains information about an item offered by a host merchant, comprising:

a shopping cart manager that creates and manages the virtual shopping cart;

an extract and verify module that performs a comparison between a host merchant's offer and a rival merchant's offer; and

a counter offer module which, when applicable, dynamically changes the item information in the virtual shopping cart, to reflect a change in the host merchant's offer based on the comparison by the extract and verify module.

2. The system of claim 1, further including a validation module that validates the rival merchant's offer.

3. The system of claim 2, further including a persistent database that stores information about the host merchant's item, the rival merchant's offer, and the virtual shopping cart.

4. The system of claim 2, further including a checkout module.

5. The system of claim 1, wherein the item information includes any one or more of:

- an item number, which is the number used to represent the item;

- an item description, which is the description of an item;

- a price, which is the price of the item quoted by the host merchant;

- a rival offer, which is the offer made by the rival merchant;

- a merchant identifier, which is the identifier of the rival merchant.

6. The system of claim 5, further including a system administrator.

7. The system of claim 3, further including a browser that manages a persistent shopping session at a rival merchant's site.

8. The system of claim 3, wherein the shopping cart manager is responsible for performing any one or more of the following actions:

- detach action, which writes the shopping cart to the persistent database and marks the shopping cart as detached;

- checkout action, which initiates a purchase operation of the item offered by the host merchant;

- save action, which writes the shopping cart to the persistent database and marks the shopping cart as saved;

- resume action, which retrieves a previously saved shopping cart from the persistent database;

- delete action, which removes a previously saved copy of the shopping cart;

- add item action, which creates and adds a item to the shopping cart;

- update item action, which retrieves a designated cart item and updates corresponding information fields;

- delete item action, which deletes the designated cart item;

- compare item action, which determines whether a rival merchant is underbidding the host merchant's offer for an item.

9. The system of claim 1, wherein the shopping cart is in any one of the following states: a detached state, or a saved state.

10. The system of claim 2, wherein the persistent database includes information about rival merchants, which allows the validation module to monitor the rival merchants; and

wherein the information maintained on the rival merchants includes any one or more of:

- frequency that shoppers initiate comparison shopping at specific rival merchants;

- frequency that the rival merchants underbid the host merchant's offer;

- amounts by which the rival merchant underbid the host merchant's offer.

11. A method of managing an on-line virtual shopping cart which contains information about an item offered by a host merchant, comprising:

initiating a shopping session;

creating and managing the virtual shopping cart;

performing a comparison between a host merchant's offer and a rival merchant's offer; and

when applicable, dynamically changing the item information in the virtual shopping cart, to reflect a change in the host merchant's offer based on the comparison.

12. The method of claim 11, further including the step of validating the rival merchant's offer.

13. The method of claim 12, further including the step of storing information about the host merchant's item, the rival merchant's offer, and the virtual shopping cart.

14. The method of claim 11, further including activating and managing a persistent shopping session at a rival merchant's site.

15. The method of claim 13, wherein managing the virtual shopping cart includes performing any one or more of the following actions:

- detach action, which writes the shopping cart to the persistent database and marks the shopping cart as detached;

- checkout action, which initiates a purchase operation of the item offered by the host merchant;

- save action, which writes the shopping cart to the persistent database and marks the shopping cart as saved;

- resume action, which retrieves a previously saved shopping cart from the persistent database;

- delete action, which removes a previously saved copy of the shopping cart;

- add item action, which creates and adds an item to the shopping cart;

- update item action, which retrieves a designated cart item and updates corresponding information fields;

- delete item action, which deletes the designated cart item;

- compare item action, which determines whether a rival merchant is underbidding the host merchant's offer for an item.

16. The method of claim 14, wherein if the rival merchant's offer is more competitive than the host merchant's offer, presenting the host merchant with an opportunity to counter-offer the rival merchant's offer.

17. The method of claim 16, wherein, if the host merchant is unable to make a counter-offer, allowing a shopper who initiates the shopping session to remove the item from the shopping cart.

18. The method of claim 17, wherein upon termination of the shopping session, providing the shopper with an opportunity to purchase the host merchant's item.

19. The method of claim 18, wherein upon termination of the shopping session, returning the shopper to a host merchant's site.

20. The method of claim 19, wherein the step of activating the persistent shopping session is initiated when the shopper leaves the host merchant's site.

21. The method of claim 20, further including deactivating the persistent shopping session when the shopper returns to the host merchant's site.

22. A computer program product for managing an on-line virtual shopping cart which contains information about an item offered by a host merchant, comprising:

a shopping cart manager that creates and manages the virtual shopping cart;

an extract and verify module that performs a comparison between a host merchant's offer and a rival merchant's offer; and

a counter offer module which, when applicable, dynamically changes the item information in the virtual shopping cart, to reflect a change in the host merchant's offer based on the comparison by the extract and verify module.

23. The computer program product of claim 22, further including a validation module that validates the rival merchant's offer.

24. The computer program product of claim 23, further including a persistent database that stores information about the host merchant's item, the rival merchant's offer, and the virtual shopping cart.

25. The computer program product of claim 23, further including a checkout module.